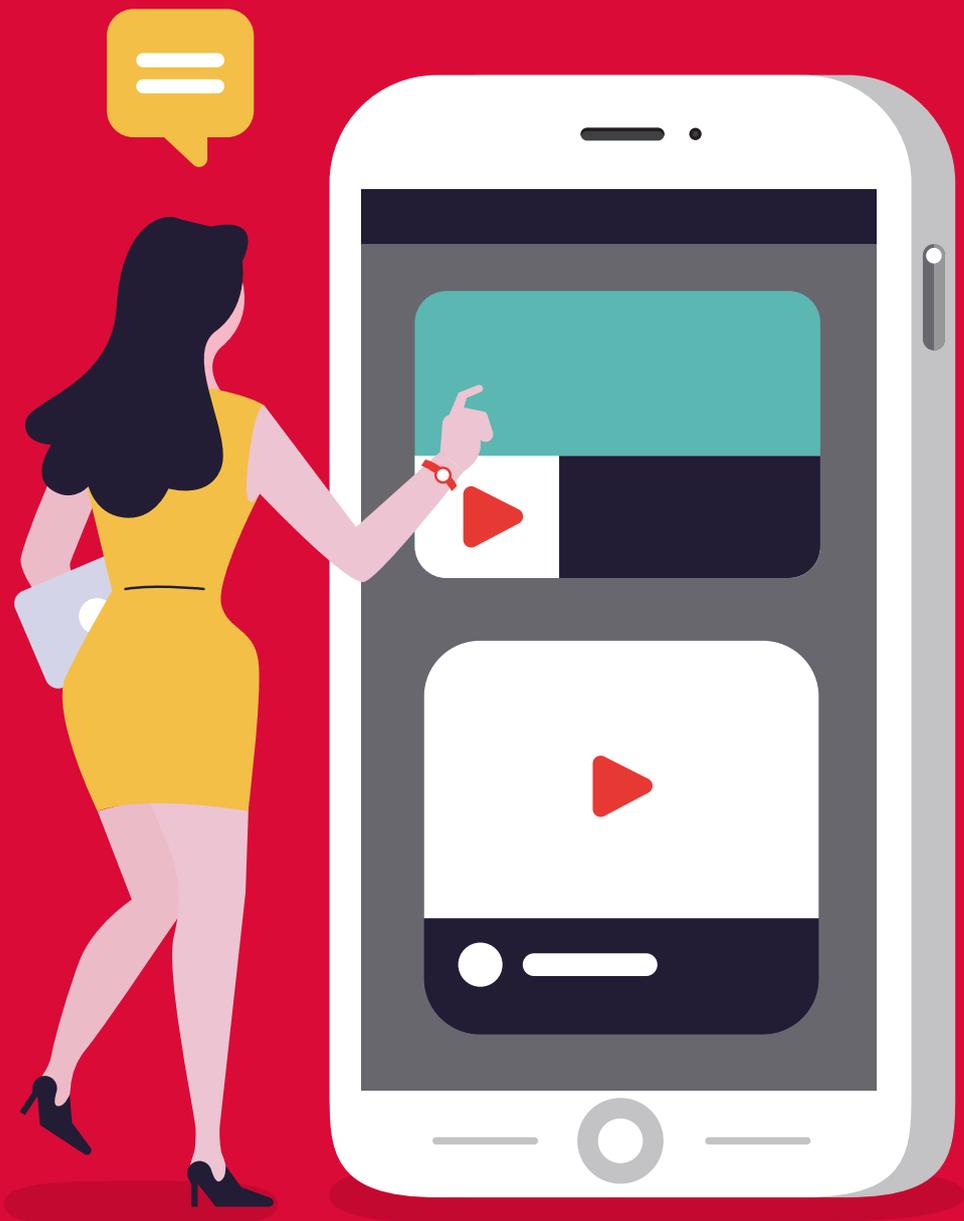# Sponge.

A Sponge workplace learning guide

—

4 elearning trends
to engage future learners

Introduction

—

Technology has had a huge impact on the way we learn. Just think about your own experiences.

For some of us, this may have been in the classroom gazing up at the written word on the (gasp) blackboard. Jump forward to today, where learning takes a different guise, googling on your smartphone, aggregating content for presentations on your laptop, watching a quick YouTube tutorial and mining your company's intranet for those gems of information.
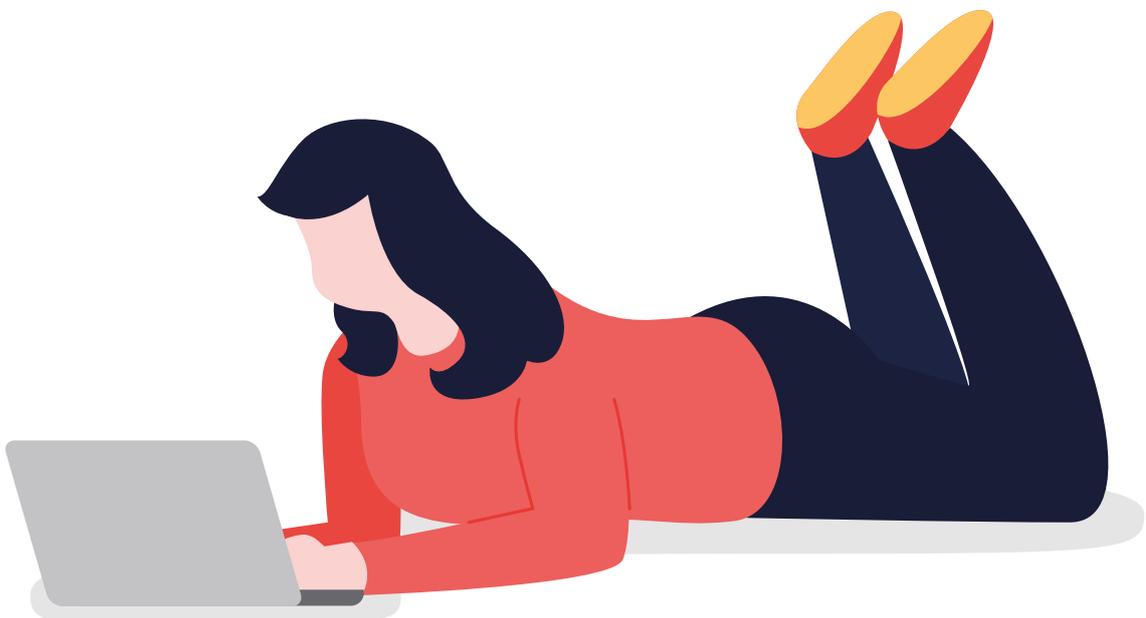
As the technology landscape continues to evolve, information becomes increasingly accessible and the challenge for Learning and Development professionals gets more complex. Your elearning must work much harder today than it ever has, cutting through the noise and delivering not only the right content but the right experience to the right person.

Against this backdrop, elearning cannot stand still; it must shift to meet the needs of people at work now and remain agile enough to keep pace with them in the future. But how?

In this guide, we've taken a look back to inform what happens next. By researching and examining the consumer technology landscape over the past 15 years, in combination with our own hands-on experience of delivering elearning solutions to global companies, we've identified four key themes.

For learning professionals looking to add greater impact and value to their elearning strategy, this guide offers insights to help you truly engage your learners and ensure L&D stays relevant in your business and to your learners in the immediate future and beyond.

The Sponge Team

A new breed
of learner

——

There's no denying technology is causing massive disruption not just for business but for society in general.

Just as organisations are having to change the way they produce, deliver and sell goods or services in response to technological developments and innovation, so too are consumers adapting to the new opportunities (and pitfalls) of digital transformation across all areas of their lives.

This in turn has changed people's expectations of workplace learning and generated different ways for employees to take more control of their own self development. In fact, it's creating a new breed of learner. The big question explored in this guide is how elearning responds to align with the way people are choosing to learn, engaging them on their own terms and through the methods and technologies they choose.

10 characteristics of a new learner[1]

Craves on-demand & just-in time

Motivated to learn

Expects technology to be seamless

Expects premium UX & aesthetics

Doesn't need structure or formality

Values originality & creativity

A natural curator of content

Seeks connection

Device agnostic: will use them all

A new world
of work

—

Our new breed of learner is part of an evolving labour force that looks very different to 15 years ago; the world of work is changing around them.

Traditional employment models, where work is mainly permanent, full-time and salaried, are shifting. The alternative or contingent workforce is on the rise, with part-timers, freelancers, contractors and gig workers playing an increasing role. In the latest survey by Deloitte, the use of alternative workers grew in key areas such as IT (33%), operations (25%) and marketing (15%) between 2017 and 2018.[2]

A quick look around today's workplace also reveals another shift: five generations in employment at the same time, for the first time ever. Longevity and improvements in health, coupled with socio-economic changes are extending career spans. With people now expecting to work over 70 years in a lifetime, the need for reskilling is becoming a necessity as individuals move between careers.

TRADS	BOOMERS	GEN X	MILLENIALS	GEN Z
1928–1944	1945–1964	1965–1979	1980–1994	1995+

Then there's the nature of work itself. According to Ginni Rometty, the CEO of IBM, 100% of jobs in the US will change as a result of technology and automation. She's highlighted the need to equip people for 'new collar' jobs (as oppose to blue or white collar jobs), where they can develop the technical and soft skills needed to succeed in the digital future by breaking free of traditional educational and career models.[3] In this context, skills development and learning will become even more important; all the more reason to work with, not against, the new breed of learner.

Don't be afraid
to mix it up
(Your learners aren't)

———

Technology, like time, waits for nobody. But one of our greatest strengths as human beings is the ability to adapt. Your employees are already doing this, it's time to listen.

You have the luxury of directly asking them what they think and feel about current learning provision. Never lose sight of this privilege and keep them at the forefront of your mind when designing new learning programmes.

Over the coming pages, we'll be sharing our insights about how to re-aligning elearning to put your people first. We're going to look at 4 key themes:

Making an impact with web and app-like experiences

———

The powerful role of video in workplace learning

———

Reimagine the learning experience using VR and AR

———

Data tracking and visibility

———

01
Make an impact
with web and app-like experiences
—

Delivering traditional elearning to Generation Z is like handing them a cassette tape.

As mobile natives they just won't get it. The first generation to grow up in a truly digital world, their expectations of technology have been set by Apple, Google and YouTube.

Multi-device, there's no compromise

It sounds straightforward, but a large proportion of employers fail to maximise the value of learning that works across multiple devices and platforms. People spend a lot of time on their phones; mobile internet usage increased from an average of 12 hours and six minutes per week in 2007 to 24 hours per week in 2017.[6]

> ## 70% of 2,000 millennials surveyed said they would quit a job if it lacked high performing and fast technology.[4]

And it's not just the 'digital natives' who set the bar high on technology; Millennials, born before the rise of the internet and smartphone are already expressing that they would leave a job if the technology wasn't up to scratch.[5]

There's a huge demand on your learners' attention from a variety of content providers. As a business, you need to accept and embrace this; treat your people as consumers and feed their demand and expectations, otherwise they'll go elsewhere.

It's familiar territory for learners so **meet your learners where they are, on their phones.**

> ### 91% of smartphone users turn to their phone for ideas while doing a given task.[7]

> ### Tablet uptake was at 58% in 2017 up from 2% in 2011.[8]

> ### Smartphone uptake was 78% in 2017 up from 27% in 2011.[9]

Familiar app mechanics can make the user experience

Swipe right isn't limited to dating apps like Tinder. The same app mechanics can power learning games, ones your people will feel encouraged to complete alongside their day-job. Again, this is where multi-device is essential to your strategy. Mobile gaming is a multi-billion-dollar global industry and with games like Fortnite seeing a massive surge in

Embrace experience in the era of the 'attention economy'

People are discerning and they are also bombarded with things that compete for their time. This is the 'attention economy' where attracting people's mental focus is a valuable commodity. But it's getting harder to win; in fact, between 2013 and 2016, global attention span dropped by 32% based on research using data from social media.[11]

> **A study by Fandom reveals that 76% of Gen-Z'ers believe technology will help them reach their goals, while more than two-thirds think it will empower them in their careers.[10]**

popularity on mobile devices, despite arguably better player experience on consoles, it's clear that mobile gaming is here to stay. If you provide your learners with mobile optimised gameplay, playable on all modern desktop, tablet and mobile platforms, you will see engagement rates rise.

Increase retention through more engaging content

The latest generation to enter the workforce really values authentic experiences and they are equally focused on developing their careers. They're not expecting you to turn compliance into Game of Thrones-style primetime but if you can deliver highly engaging content, allowing them to experience relevant and realistic examples in a visually stimulating way; or, play an interactive game that allows them to achieve mastery through 'levelling up'; they will feel engaged and invested in the experience, the key to learning that sticks.

To truly win hearts and minds, L&D has to deliver something 'wow', something that's not just good enough, but genuinely good. Content that behaves like the best of the web or the world of apps is where you should be setting your sights. Anything that creates a barrier or signals clunky user experience is going to impact on how engaged learners feel and create a disconnect between you, the learning and their development.
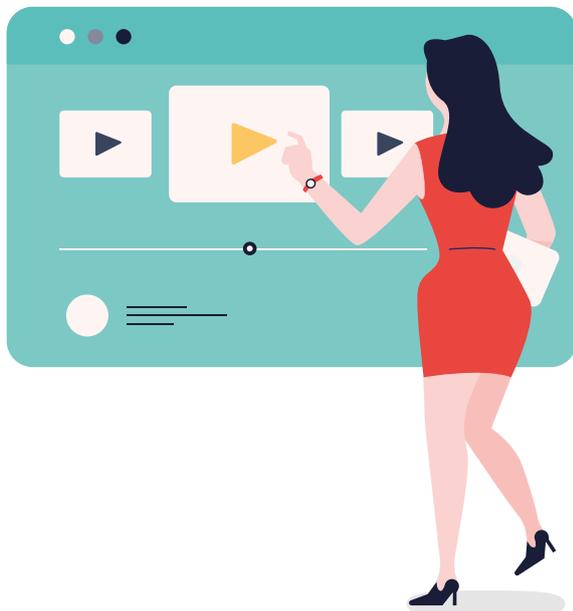
02

The powerful role of video
in workplace learning
—

Video has long been a staple part of elearning so what's changed? Quite a lot in fact.

The way people consume and enjoy video content is morphing, and it's no longer enough to simply include some video clips in an elearning module and expect learners to be satisfied. By studying video trends in the wider world, we can see how tastes are changing and how we can evolve video in elearning to keep learners engaged.

Searches for 'how to' videos on YouTube are growing by 70% year on year.[12]

The Netflix Effect

This is the all-encompassing term for the shift to streaming and video content platforms. And with around 150 million global subscribers to Netflix, it's hard to ignore this shift in the way video content is consumed.[13] With 'A-list' film and television content being released straight to subscription services, and with users' preferences driving demand for content, people now have more choice and power than ever before. These subscription content platforms are increasingly shaping viewing habits and there's much elearning can utilising, including:

Interactive storytelling

In 2018, Netflix released Black Mirror: Bandersnatch, its first interactive film. In this 'choose your own story', events are determined by the viewer, who is presented with a series of choices that send the film down different paths. Branching is a familiar concept for game and digital learning designers but represented a new departure for film and television. Its popularity demonstrates the potential to engage an audience by giving them control and responsibility for the outcome of the narrative.

Sponge.

'Bingeable' content

Let's face it, we've probably all succumbed to the power of 'bingeable' content – that new series you just have to keep watching, even though its 2am! What if we could use even a sprinkle of this 'bingeability' within elearning? By creating video that's episodic and uses narrative hooks, like cliff-hangers and compelling characters, we can tap into this trend that drives people to want to find out what happens next.

Shareable and user-generated

In a point and shoot culture, everyone's a director and people are familiar with creating and sharing their content. Mining the workforce's vast knowledge of processes and operations improves morale, encouraging a sharing and collaborative culture. It reflects the general societal trend of online sharing and openness, supports people development and skills-sharing and promotes greater efficiencies for the business.

Vertical video

Social media apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp have literally changed the shape of video, from a landscape frame to a portrait one. Vertical video produces an image that is taller than it is wide; it's the natural way most people film with a mobile phone. In social media apps, the space at the top and the bottom of the screen is being filled with things like stickers, polls and AR filters. As elearning becomes increasingly mobile, vertical video, enriched with these interactions, offers a new opportunity to engage and connect with audiences.

03

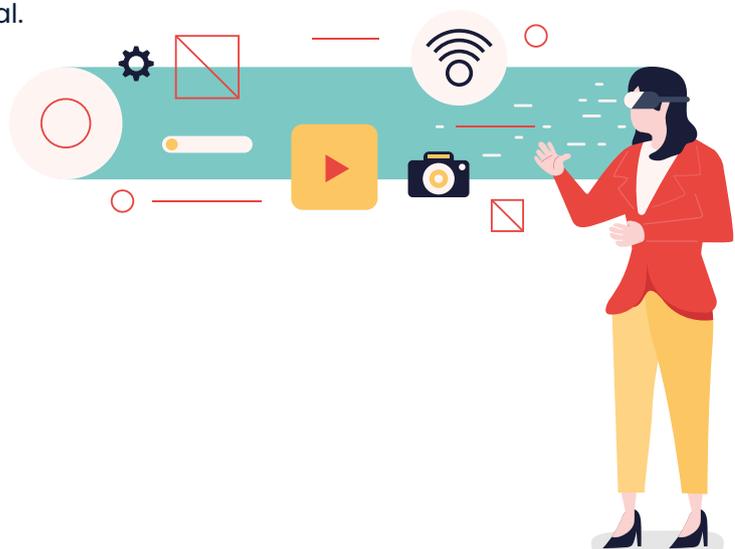## **Reimagine**
the learning experience

With so much information, so readily available online, today's learners can conduct independent research, curate content and weigh up endless sources of information across so many platforms.

Even within their own organisation, your people are natural content aggregators, collating from many sources, anything from Wikipedia to niche blogs, maybe even your own company intranet and filing systems. This is why the proposition of formalised learning can seem restrictive to someone who has basically developed a level of 'information impatience'.

This is an important piece of the puzzle when it comes to defining your elearning strategy and adds weight to the argument for immersive learning as the perfect fit for tomorrow's learner. In a world where information is readily available, you may find that people will only be willing to trade their time for something special. This is particularly pertinent when people are time poor.

Survey finds that 78% of US millennials would choose to spend money on experiences over buying a physical thing.[14]

Immersive learning can create a memorable event, offering an experience they can't access anywhere else via their usual information channels. Successful delivery of immersive learning programmes requires time, expertise and investment but can deliver impressive learning outcomes and a unique value to your learners; a value they couldn't achieve alone.

AR that appeals to all

Popular consumer applications, such as Pokemon Go and more recently Harry Potter: Wizards Unite, have expanded the audience for Augmented Reality (AR). This popularisation of AR through integration with social and gaming platforms has seen AR use in the US increase 30.2% in 2018.[15] That's a huge jump and one that can't be ignored. There's growing evidence that immersive works so well because it creates an environment that feels 'immediate' and where people feel 'invested' in learning. Of course, being immersed in the environment naturally encourages people to want to understand it and provides a deep psychological 'anchor' for learning.

Wider adoption of accessible VR

VR still retains a 'wow factor' within office environments, offering a big step change from a desktop or classroom experience. You don't need a VR dome or CAVE to offer a meaningful experience.

With mobile VR and a headset, you can make this technology super accessible to your learners, giving them an environment to explore, enriched with information that can help people really connect with the subject matter.

No limits in a virtual world

Typically, businesses use VR to recreate hard-to-reach or hazardous environments, but it has many more everyday applications. Whatever your challenge, whether it's exploring the machinations of a complex technical manufacturing process or helping medical staff understand the biological effects of a procedure on the body, or even helping people with observation and conversational skills, well-designed immersive learning experiences can help you deliver this learning impactfully.

04

Data tracking
and visibility

—

We're living in a data driven economy, marketing automation platforms, CRMs and finance systems now give businesses meaningful insight.

performance measures, so you can prove the impact of training and show ROI on the learning programmes you have in flight. Did learners get better at carrying out a specific task after completing training? Did those efficiencies save the business money?

> ## In the age of big data, L&D need to show meaningful data beyond completion rates to prove the real impact of learning for the business.

The pressure is on L&D professionals to prove how their learning initiatives contribute to tangible business results and, ultimately, the bottom line.

Some Learning Management Systems (LMS) offer advanced reporting and dashboards but many more do not. Make it a priority to decide what you want to track, assess the best tools to support this process and incorporate that into your learning strategy.

There's a need to dig deeper, beyond simple activity measures into hard

Did behavioural change occur as a result of the training?

Time spent up-front defining what you need to track is worthwhile to gain insights and prove what's working and what's not. You can then refine future course content. If your LMS has customisable dashboards this is a great opportunity to pull through metrics on the impact of training at a more granular level.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) – when learning gets personal

The technology is already here, and it puts UX at the heart of the debate. The theory goes, that a combination of Machine Learning (ML), Deep Learning (DL) and Natural Language Processing (NLP) allows AI-powered LMSs to aggregate and deliver content refined for a very specific audience or an individual.

AI technology lives and thrives on data, so its success in learning metrics is dependent on both the quantity and quality of this data; enough people need to be using the system in the first place, and they need to use the system in enough depth to reflect their preference and habits. Only then can AI successfully tailor content specifically to their needs.

The best learning is deeply personal, and AI definitely has a role to play. Looking to the future and the increased adoption of data tracking through wearable technologies, it may be possible to achieve real time monitoring of learner engagement – either through advances in data analytics or physiological monitoring, also known as 'bio-feedback'. It may even be possible to measure brain activity as someone is learning and modifying the learning content in real time based on brain activity to understand how attentive they are and what engages them most.

The digital
road ahead
——

Learning is a stimulating and inspiring part of life, it's exciting to consider how new innovations will continue to heighten this experience for future generations.

The advent of new technologies like Twitter's patent, Active Learning System, which is a process for training a deep neural network, will be sure to touch learning design in years to come. Facebook has submitted a patent for a wireless coupling of head-mounted displays with consoles or relay systems, to use with augmented, virtual and mixed reality experiences, which could transform the way immersive training and games are designed. Innovations are everywhere, and we should be looking far and wide for inspiration to stay ahead in elearning.

We'll leave you with a few key takeaways:

1. **Learner experience first:** Embracing change and developing a thoughtful learner-centric strategy will help you deliver the business results the board wants to see, as well as helping you to retain and grow your brightest talent

2. **Wow factor is important:** Creating learning experiences that delight and engage your learners, including immersive and interactive elements, will send a strong message about your culture and encourage people to feel invested in your goals and purpose.

3. **Data is your friend:** To create meaningful learning you need to understand its effectiveness. AI can help you deliver the personalisation that tomorrow's learner will define as essential to their workplace learning experience.

4. **UX matters:** Your audience is discerning, informed and accustomed to seamless technology. Clunky learning will take them out of the moment and mar the experience. Make sure your learning solutions work across multiple devices and platforms and employees don't leave their technology expectation at the door when they're at work.

5. **Deliver something unique:** We've discussed the all-important experiential value of learning, highly prized across generations. Tomorrow's learners are likely to be even more demanding, as well as having more technology at their fingertips to aggregate from multiple sources. Be the voice that cuts through it all and gets people excited and engaged.

The huge technological advances we've seen in the recent past make one thing clear: people's digital expectations are set by what they experience as consumers. We need to narrow the gap between the digital experience in our personal lives and that of learning technology in the workplace to engage the learners of today and build strong foundations for the future.

About Sponge

___

Sponge is one of the world's leading custom digital learning providers. The company delivers seriously creative workplace training for global brands across multiple sectors and industries including pharmaceutical, retail, manufacturing, finance, professional services and FMCG.

Founded in 2004 by Louise Pasterfield, Sponge's bespoke learning solutions solve multiple business challenges, from risk and compliance (e.g. cybersecurity and health and safety) to business transformation, people development (e.g. employee onboarding) and skills enhancement. Harnessing the very latest in cutting-edge technology, Sponge's solutions include elearning, learning games and gamification, animation and motion graphics, immersive technologies (e.g. interactive video, simulations, virtual reality and augmented reality), microsites and blended learning. Our digital learning is used in more than 124 countries worldwide.

Winning multiple awards over the past 15 years, the company is a market leader in the digital learning industry. Sponge was named Learning Provider of the Year at 2019 Learning Awards and won silver for Company of the Year at the 2018 Learning Technologies Awards.

Talk to us today about adding greater impact and value to your elearning content and strategy.

___

+44 (0)330 390 3920

hello@spongelearning.com

spongelearning.com

linkedin.com/company/spongelearning

@sponge_learning

Sponge.

___

References

1. Accenture.
2. Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends 2019.
3. Ginni Rometty's speech to the World Economic Forum, Davos, 2019.
4. Jive Communications.
5. Jive Communications.
6. Communications Market Report 2018, Ofcom.
7. Google/Ipsos, "Consumers in the Micro-Moment," 2015.
8. Communications Market Report 2018, Ofcom.
9. Communications Market Report 2018, Ofcom.
10. Fandom.
11. Technical University of Denmark.
12. Think with Google, Google Data, 2015.
13. Netflix.
14. Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research.
15. ISACA.